

2013 Spirit Lecture features Villa-Komaroff

By Monica Frazier

The 12th annual Spirit Lecture, “A Life in Science: From Cloning to Cell Therapies,” was presented March 22 by cell biologist Lydia Villa-Komaroff, Ph.D. Sponsored by the NIEHS Diversity Council and the Women Scientists Assembly, the Spirit Lecture Series has a history of hosting talks by outstanding women in science, each March, in honor of

Linked Video

[Watch Villa-Komaroff's Women's History Month presentation March 21 at NIH \(58:58\)](#)

NIEHS Deputy Director Rick Woychik, Ph.D., introduced Villa-Komaroff and commented on the mission of the Spirit Lecture. “We [at NIEHS] recognize that successfully navigating today’s workplace involves balancing responsibilities for our families, our jobs, and the multiple roles we participate in, as we mentor and reach out to the wider community, all of which compete for our time and talents,” he said.

Villa-Komaroff was recently selected by the Huffington Post as one of the [50 women](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/18/50-women-in-health_n_2879370.html) (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/18/50-women-in-health_n_2879370.html) who shaped America’s Health, for her outstanding scientific achievements in academia, research, and business.

Accepting no barriers

Only the third Mexican-American woman ever to receive a science Ph.D., Villa-Komaroff has stopped at nothing to achieve her goals. During her postdoctoral work, she performed experiments at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, during the time Harvard University banned recombinant DNA research. It was this work that she brought back to Harvard and which led to the first recombinant production of mammalian insulin, an accomplishment that led to her first patent and acclaim.

Now the chief scientific officer and a board member of [CytonomeST](http://www.cytonomest.com/), (<http://www.cytonomest.com/>) Villa-Komaroff has successfully transitioned from academia to industry, an achievement many NIEHS trainees often wonder whether possible. Prior to joining CytonomeST, Villa-Komaroff held academic positions at major universities and research institutions, before moving into administrative roles and, ultimately, the challenging world of biomedical startup companies.

Equal opportunity criticism

Along the way, Villa-Komaroff worked for several acclaimed scientists, including Nobel laureates David Baltimore, Ph.D., as a graduate student at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Walter Gilbert, Ph.D., as a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard. She was insistent that choosing the right mentors was vital to her success, and that her mentors were extremely supportive during years when women in science, especially minority women, were not well accepted.

However, Villa-Komaroff made a point to emphasize that a critical mentor should not be regarded as a bad mentor. As she related her experiences to the audience, she explained, “It was not about you. It was about the work.” She described her mentors as equal opportunity critics, something she strives to be in her own mentoring.



Using a crafting metaphor, Villa-Komaroff described the nonlinear route she followed through academia to her current role at the cutting edge of biomedicine. “We weave a life,” she said. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Office of Fellows Career Development Director Tammy Collins, Ph.D., left, encouraged trainees to attend the talk. Postdoctoral fellow Staton Wade, Ph.D., center, was on hand to hear Villa-Komaroff, as was NIH Hispanic Employment Program Manager Gerard Roman. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Also in the audience, right to left, were Diane D’Agostin, Spirit Lecture Committee member Diane Spencer, and Charlie Tate. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

Of her own mentoring style, she said, “When undergraduates used to send me emails about spending the summer in my lab, I never answered the first email.” She highlighted the need for persistence by adding, “Nobody who wasn’t willing to send a second email was going to be spending any time in my lab, so just remember that.”

Advice for trainees

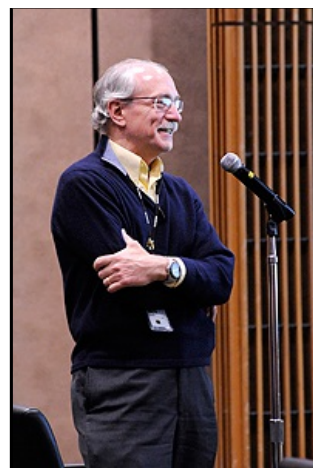
While discussing her decisions throughout her career, Villa-Komaroff offered several pieces of advice, particularly to trainees. “You won’t get what you don’t ask for,” she said, “so aiming as high as you can is extremely important.”

Villa-Komaroff also addressed the subject of work/life balance. “I think I stopped speaking about balance a long time ago,” she said. “It’s not about balance. It’s about juggling.”

Encouraging postdocs to be open to nontraditional career paths, Villa-Komaroff continued, “We have done a disfavor to all of us, by tending to think of a Ph.D. as a degree that limits you to a particular endeavor, or field, or even job type. A Ph.D. is a degree that teaches you how to think and how to learn, and those are skills that you can apply in a very wide range of settings very, very nicely.”

If anyone can be a good example of outstanding skill adaptability, and embracing new opportunities and challenges at the highest level, Villa-Komaroff is certainly that individual.

(Monica Frazier, Ph.D., is an Intramural Research Training Award fellow in the NIEHS Mechanisms of Mutation Group.)



Woychik introduced Villa-Komaroff and led off the question-and-answer session. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Diversity Council chair Brad Collins, right, presented Villa Komaroff with a copy of the poster advertising her talk. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



The reception following Villa-Komaroff's presentation featured Mexican fare and sweets. Chip Romeo, Ph.D., left, and Dave Malarkey, D.V.M., Ph.D., enjoyed refreshments as they talked. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Spirit Lecture Committee members joined their guest at the refreshment tables. Shown left to right, are Suramya Waidyanatha, Ph.D., Villa-Komaroff, Veronica Godfrey Robinson, Spencer, Eli Ney, Collins, committee chair Molly Vallant, Grace Kissling, Ph.D., Roman, and Angela King-Herbert, D.V.M. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

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